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A GRAVE DILEMMA

By 1840, London's cemeteries were full to bursting, smelling foul, and posing a serious health risk to the living.

Ruth Levitt reveals how the Victorians addressed the problem of disposing of the dead

Dr Ruth Levitt is a visiting senior research fellow at the Institute of North American Studies, King's College London. This article draws on her research for her forthcoming book: *Kensett: Artisans in Britain and America in the 18th and 19th Centuries*

"Communal pits proliferated. Coffins were removed soon after burial to save space. **Sometimes quicklime was spread over corpses** to hasten decomposition"

"I am sure the moral sensibilities of many delicate minds must sicken to witness the heaped soil, saturated and blackened with human remains and fragments of the dead... the splash of water is heard from the graves, as the coffins descend, producing a shudder in every mourner."

Reverend John Blackburn's chilling words appeared in a report on burial practices in towns, prepared by Edwin Chadwick for the home secretary in 1843. Deaths were rising, especially in overcrowded and squalid urban neighbourhoods, where cholera, tuberculosis, diphtheria, smallpox and typhus were major killers. Most of the old burial grounds were full to overflowing, or soon would be. The dense mix of houses, shops, taverns, factories and workplaces around them meant they had no adjacent space for expansion. Some parishes found additional land elsewhere. St Martin in the Fields in Trafalgar Square used a Drury Lane cemetery and opened another three miles north in Camden Town.

Gravediggers adopted desperate measures. Shallow burials and communal pits proliferated; coffins were removed soon after burial to save space. Sometimes there was no coffin, and quicklime was spread over corpses to hasten decomposition. The smells were dreadful, and upkeep of the burial grounds was often minimal or absent. Body snatchers could easily dig up newly buried remains to sell to medical schools that needed cadavers for anatomy students to dissect. Professor Knox in Edinburgh even paid the infamous murderers Burke and Hare around £8 a corpse (approximately £550 today) for each of their 17 victims in 1828. Chadwick, secretary to the Poor Law Commission, argued that the "putrid emanations" from corpses in overcrowded burial grounds and vaults were "injurious to the health of the living".

Charles Dickens, who knew Chadwick, fictionalised the graveyard at Drury Lane in *Bleak House* (1853) as “a hemmed-in churchyard, pestiferous and obscene, whence malignant diseases are communicated to the bodies of our dear brothers and sisters who have not departed”. Dickens also spoke out against ostentatious and costly funerals and extravagant displays of mourning. By the mid-19th century, these had become the norm and, worse still, the poor were emulating them at a ruinous cost. These did “no honour to the memory of the dead, did great dishonour to the living, as inducing them to associate the most solemn of human occasions with unmeaning mummeries, dishonest debt, profuse waste, and bad example in an utter oblivion of responsibility”.

A Leeds doctor told Chadwick that labourers delayed burying deceased relatives because they could not afford the undertakers' charges. It was not unusual “to see a corpse laid out in a room where eight to twelve persons have to sleep, and sometimes even both sleep and eat”. According to Chadwick, the most crowded grounds belonged to private undertakers: “In these places an uneducated man generally acts as minister, puts on a surplice, and reads the church service, or any other service that may be called for. These grounds are morally offensive.”

The successful, commercially run Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris (opened 1804) soon became an influential model: a landscaped, 110-acre ‘natural’ park with capacity for hundreds of thousands of burials in graves, tombs, catacombs, vaults and an ossuary, with funerary sculpture and horticulture that visitors could admire.

Garden cemeteries

In 1832 parliament authorised the General Cemetery Company to raise speculative share capital to build a new, large, park-like cemetery at Kensal Green, a London suburb north-west of Paddington. It opened the following year, occupying 48 acres. Soon, another six privately owned cemeteries were established around London: at West Norwood in 1837, Highgate in 1839, Abney Park, Brompton and Nunhead in 1840 and Tower Hamlets in 1841.

In 1843 John Claudius Loudon explained in his book on the design and management of cemeteries that the main purpose of a burial ground was to dispose of the remains of the dead “in such a manner as that their decomposition, and return to the earth from which they sprung, shall not prove injurious to the living; either by affecting their health, or shocking their feelings, opinions, or prejudices”. The secondary purpose was, or ought to be “the improvement of the moral sentiments and general taste of all classes, and more especially of the great masses of society”. Loudon advocated single, sealed, biodegradable coffins buried deep in single graves, never re-opened, in new landscaped cemeteries on well-drained suburban sites. Meanwhile, in 1852 the Metropolitan Burial Act outlawed any further burials in central London, and by 1884 the Disused Burial Grounds Act prohibited burial grounds being built on.

Battlefield dead

Part of the overcrowding problem stemmed, to a degree, from the fact that religious leaders, parliament and public opinion were slow to accept alternatives. Most forms of Christianity abhorred cremation, regarding it as contrary to belief in the resurrection of the body. The Roman Catholic church actually banned cremation between 1886 and 1963,

only tolerating the burning of the battlefield dead. Nowadays, Orthodox Judaism, Greek and Russian Orthodox Christianity, Islam and Zoroastrianism prohibit cremation, while Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism and Jainism mandate it.

In 1822 the poet Shelley drowned at sea off the glorious dead Where the great and good rest in peace the coast of northern Italy and his body, washed up on the shore, was cremated, to conform with Italy's quarantine rules. Serious debate about cremation began in Italy in the 1850s when doctors published articles making the sanitary case for cremation as an alternative to burial. A model of a furnace designed by one of them was exhibited at the International Exposition in Vienna in 1873, impressing a prominent British doctor, Sir Henry Thompson. He published an article in the *Contemporary Review* in January 1874 entitled 'The Treatment of the Body After Death', and founded a group that became the Cremation Society of England (now of Great Britain). They raised funds and bought a site for a crematorium at Woking from the London Necropolis Company, but local opposition and continuing uncertainty about the legality of cremation delayed further progress. The main objection was that cremation could destroy evidence of crimes.

A landmark judgment at Cardiff Assizes on 15 February 1884 established that cremating a body was legal provided it did not cause nuisance or offence to others. Judge Sir James Stephen acquitted William Price, a Welsh doctor and Druid whom the police had charged with attempting to cremate the body of his five-month-old son on an open hillside at Llantrisant. Protected by this judgment, Woking crematorium opened in 1885, accepting only bodies of legally certified deaths. Supporters of the Cremation Society introduced a Bill in parliament to underpin the new legal position, but the government and opposition defeated it. That didn't stop crematoria opening in Manchester, Glasgow, Liverpool, Hull and Darlington between 1892 and 1901. In 1902, the Cremation Act made its way through parliament. In that same year, around 450 people were cremated, less than 1 per cent of annual deaths.

Cremations finally exceeded burials in 1968 and, by the centenary of the act, 243 crematoria were disposing of over 430,000 bodies – more than 71 per cent of all deaths. Since then, interest in 'natural burials', where bodies are interred in a manner that does not slow decomposition, and allows the body to recycle naturally, has grown fast – so much so, in fact, that local authorities are increasingly providing 'green' areas within traditional cemeteries for environmentally friendly burials. It seems that the days of shallow burials and quicklime are fading fast.

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Dr Ruth Levitt talks burials on our podcast [E historyextra.com/podcasts](https://www.historyextra.com/podcasts)

"John Claudius Loudon advocated single, sealed, biodegradable coffins buried deep in single graves on well-drained suburban sites"

Highgate cemetery

This fashionable north London cemetery – designed by the architect Stephen Geary – was

opened in 1839. Back then, the 17-acre site cost £3,500; today, the expanded 37-acre plot would be worth billions. Highgate houses more than 170,000 individuals, buried in 53,000 graves – among them Karl Marx, George Eliot, Michael Faraday and Charles Cruft.

Kensal Green cemetery

John Claudius Loudon, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, William Makepeace Thackeray and WH Smith are among the 250,000 people interred in this west London cemetery. Kensal Green was opened in 1833 as the first of the capital's seven 'garden cemeteries', and has since expanded to 77 acres bordering Harrow Road, Ladbroke Grove and the Grand Union Canal. A cremation, ashes plot and standard burial at the cemetery will now set you back about £895, £1,670 and £3,750 respectively.

Westminster Abbey

The abbey was the burial place of choice for most English and British monarchs from Henry III in 1272 all the way through to George II in 1760. Lying with this long list of royals at the thousand-year-old site are such luminaries as Charles Dickens, Geoffrey Chaucer, Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin. The abbey also houses the grave of the Unknown Warrior, an unidentified British soldier killed in the First World War.

Frogmore Royal Mausoleum

This is a burial place fit for an empress. When Queen Victoria and Prince Albert planned their own royal mausoleum, they saw to it that no expense was spared: the Italian Romanesque building boasts a richly decorated interior, and two granite sarcophagi bearing the queen and prince's marble effigies. Outside is a royal burial ground with over 30 graves, including those of Victoria's servant John Brown, the former Edward VIII and his wife, Wallis Simpson.

Images omitted for copyright reasons

Victorian burials A family mourns the death of a loved one in Frank Holl's 1872 painting, *I Am the Resurrection and the Life, or the Village Funeral*. By this time, corpses in overcrowded cemeteries were deemed "injurious to the health of the living"

A deadly trade The murderers Burke and Hare were paid £8 for the bodies of each of their victims. Yet many body snatchers simply dug up newly buried cadavers from cemeteries

Into the flames This drawing depicts Britain's first legal cremation – that of Jeanette Caroline Pickersgill in Woking, 1885. Cremations didn't exceed burials until 1968

French blueprint A view of Paris's Père Lachaise cemetery in 1815. This landscaped, 110-acre 'natural' park with the capacity for hundreds of thousands of burials influenced cemetery designers on the other side of the English Channel

Karl Marx is among the 170,000 people buried at Highgate

Victoria and Albert are buried in this grand Italian Romanesque structure

Webs ite E To **locate a grave** of an ancestor or someone famous, go to findagrave.com